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In Denpasar, Bali the 3rd Symposium was hosted and sponsored by the Institut Seni Indonesia (ISI), Denpasar, Bali

Proceedings of the 3rd Symposium is sponsored by
Institut Seni Indonesia (ISI), Denpasar, Bali

The publication was edited by a group effort with volunteers from the ICTM Study Group on Performing Arts of Southeast Asia

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Printer
Institut Seni Indonesia (ISI), Denpasar, Bali

Printed copies
500

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Indonesia National Library

Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Symposium of the ICTM Study Group on Performing Arts of Southeast Asia (3rd: 2014: Denpasar, Bali)


Design and Cover photographs by Hanafi Hussin.
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TRANSGENDER/SEXUAL-ISM IN THE RONG NGENG DANCE OF THE ORAK LAWOI IN PHUKET

Introduction

A group of seven of us get down from our hired SUV once we reach the village in Ko Sireh. Gathering our belongings, we walk around observing the villagers making preparations for the Pelacak festival. At an open space in the middle of the village, we notice a group of women decorating an archetypal boat with flowers, while a few men, sitting several feet away at a shaded platform, tune and thereafter, play their musical instruments. The musicians provide musical accompaniment to a veteran female dancer-singer, Mak Jiu, who begins singing. Moving away from this scene, I continue walking. At the wide veranda outside one of the houses, I hear sounds of people giggling. My first impression is that the giggling comes from a group of young women. From behind, the presumed adult women move gracefully, have curvy figures, and dress beautifully in kebaya. Putting on their make-up, they hastily get ready for the event. I move closer to them with the intention of getting a closer look and to snap a few photos if permitted by the group members. I realise that I misconstrued their gender identity when one of them turned towards me. I realise that there is not just one transgendered person, but, three of them. The group also comprises effeminate young men and teen-aged girls. They apply make-up and put on their ornaments. Speechless for a moment, I have contradictory feelings. I am not sure whether I am shocked at their presence or whether I am attracted to them considering how beautiful they look. I observe their attire, make-up, and comportment. One of the transgendered persons, who converses fluently in Malay language, says that the artists are getting ready for the soon to begin Rong Ngeng performance. After a little while, they walk towards the area where Mak Jiu is singing and where the decorated ceremonious model boat is placed. Upon reaching the site, the three transgendered performers begin dancing Rong Ngeng to the live musical ensemble, at first, in front of the model boat, and gradually around the boat. Following their simple and repetitive hand and feet movements, other middle-aged and older women dance around the boat. The latter wear common attire except for a small number who wear knee length colourful skirts on top of their black tights. Soon, another three transgendered person arrive at the scene dressed colourfully in Bollywood style skirt and blouse attire. The spectacle of Rong Ngeng dance being led by the transgendered dancers and the seemingly fashion parade of three other transgendered artists attract a bigger crowd. Slowly, the ceremonial procession ensues.

The above scene is recounted from my ethnographic field study carried out during the Pelacak celebration in Phuket in October 2013 with my research team members. Pelacak is an imperative event celebrated by the Orak Lawoi, sea gypsies. During this festival, the villagers of three chosen sites, Sapam and Rawai in Phuket Island and Ko Sireh Island, perform rituals to express their gratitude to spirits. A model boat is carried around the village in a ceremonial procession and is launched into the sea. While the presence of a transgendered group was inevitable in all the three sites during this event, the level of visibility varied. The transgendered and transsexual Rong Ngeng or Rong Ngeng performers were more visible in Ko Sireh compared to Sapam and Rawai. Focusing on their performances at the ritual, secular, and peripheral spaces, this paper will discuss that Rong Ngeng is a dense site for gender and sexual mobility.

Historically, Rong Ngeng dance was introduced to the villages in southwest Thailand by a woman named Bunga between 1936 and 1939. She taught young local women and teen-aged girls and trained them to become professional singer-dancers. While men predominantly occupied the role as musicians, women emerged as visibly empowered singer-dancers, exemplifying a gendered division of labor. Women formed troupes and performed widely in most village celebrations and at urban cities. Mak Jiu, mentioned in this paper earlier, is an example of a professional Rong Ngeng singer-dancer based in Ko Sireh. She is also a master teacher and troupe leader.